

A SIMPLE TIP: HOW TO TEACH SPELLING SO IT STICKS

By Jane Bell Kiester

Correct spelling of commonly used, grade-appropriate words is an important component of the Common Core Standards for Language Arts. But how do we make our students retain spelling words after the test so they use them correctly in their writing?

After many years of total frustration in trying to teach what I call “forget the spelling of the words after the test,” I came up with a simple method that worked. I used it in my classroom with much success for many years with all levels of students.

This year, I taught 4th grade writing in a school in which the students had never been taught spelling. When I read their first writing efforts, I was appalled. Five months later, most of these same egregious spellers could correctly spell the common words that they use when they write. The method also worked well with my 7th and 8th graders in previous years.

While I know that some of us have to teach the required generic words in the traditional manner in order to satisfy state requirements, we can also use this simple method to address the words our students misspell. Why teach spelling in a manner that perpetuates the “forget the spelling of the words after the test” syndrome? Instead, I invite you to try the following that worked for me:

- 1) Have your students write an essay or story. Then peruse the papers, highlighting or circling all misspelled words. In other words, pick the words from your students’ writing. Choose words that two or more students consistently misspell.
- 2) Make a list of the 60-70 most commonly misspelled words you found in your students’ writing.
- 3) Assign only four words each week. This is one of the keys that make this method so successful.
- 4) During the week, repeatedly practice the spelling of those four words using simple games (like throwing a “spelling skunk” and asking students to spell a word). You can do this for two to three minutes every day. With only four words, it doesn’t take long.
- 5) Use kinesthetic techniques like writing words in the air, spelling them using a finger on your arm, or chanting them to a familiar tune. Do this daily for one minute.
- 6) Give a few pre-tests in disguised form, like having students write one or two of the words on a scrap of paper and place it on their desks facedown (so others don’t cheat). You then hurry around the room checking the spelling of that word as students complete their daily Caught’yas (see books from Maupin House by Capstone Professional).
- 7) Require students to complete an engaging activity (homework?) to help cement the words in their brains. Examples: Wear the words by making a word search out of the words; make a picture using the words over and over to “draw” it, etc. I’m sure you can come up with some creative activities.
- 8) Each week’s spelling tests should contain seven words—the current week’s four words plus three words from previous weeks’ words. I like to dictate a silly sentence or two that contain all seven words. It is sometimes tough to compose, but writing the words in context is much more effective a test than simply spelling the words alone.

Do all the above with a grin and a good sense of humor. The method worked for me, and it will for you as well. You too can teach spelling so it sticks.

Jane Kiester is the author of *Blowing Away the State Writing Assessment Test (Third Edition): Four Steps to Better Scores for Students of All Levels*, 2006, Capstone Professional.

Also by Jane Kiester:

Caught’ya! Grammar with a Giggle, 1990

Caught’ya Again! More Grammar with a Giggle, 1993

The Chortling Bard! Grammar with a Giggle for High School, 1998

Caught’ya! Grammar with a Giggle for Middle School: Giggles in the Middle, 2005

Caught’ya! Grammar with a Giggle for First Grade: Eggbert, the Ball, Bounces by Himself, 2002

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